

*Our Lost Homeland: A Visit to Guiliguia / Kilikia (Cilicia / Կիլիկիա) Through Western Armenia (Արևմտահայաստան / Batı Ermenistan)*

by [Asbarez Staff](#) - [November 6, 2018](#) - in [Armenia](#), [Columns](#), [Community Links](#), [Latest News](#), [Top Stories](#), [Western Armenia](#)

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BY CATHERINE YESAYAN

If you've been following my trips, you may know that last year I had a chance to travel to Western Armenia. It was my first visit to our ancestral lands. I must admit it was pretty emotional to witness the heritage that Armenians contributed to over centuries in that part of the world.

This year another opportunity arose, and I didn't hesitate to join that tour again because the itinerary combined fun and pilgrimage—five-night at a resort by the Mediterranean Sea plus a visit to the ancient region of Cappadocia.

Since Turkey and Armenia are not in good terms and there's no political relation between the two countries, a car cannot directly cross the Armenian border into Turkey. For that, buses travel through Georgia and then enter Turkey.

On our first day of the trip, we travelled from Yerevan north to Georgia, then crossed the border and entered Turkey. From there, we drove south and stopped at a few sightseeing locations and then we reached the city of Erzurum [Էրզրում / Կարին], which by the end of 19th century boasted around 50,000 Armenians among the population.

Today the Armenian Quarters of Erzurum is all in ruins and a few churches have been turned into Mosques. However, the Sanassarian College [Սանասարեան], a comprehensive boys' school which was built by a wealthy Armenian merchant, Mıgrdich Sanasarian, and at the time was a sensation; it still stands like a jewel.

We arrived in Erzurum past 6:30 p.m. The Sanasarian school, which has been turned into a museum, was already closed. But the gate was open, and we could enter and visit the grounds.



Armenian Girls' school in Adana

At that very moment, while we stood at the steps of the museum, a Turkish woman dressed in Islamic garb, approached us. Soon we found out that she was the wife of the director of the museum. She gave us a brief history of the school and told how much she respects Armenians. She added that the school building was bought in 1912 from Armenians, not confiscated. That was an interesting point of which we were not aware.

Then she said that she would try to get permission to let us inside the museum. She called her husband, got his permission and asked the janitor to let us in. It truly was a surreal moment.



St Marineh church in Moush

The school is preserved because for a while it was used as an assembly building for the corps of government. Last year, I had already been inside of the school, which is like a palace fit for a king. After that incredible encounter we continued our trip to Erzincan where we stayed overnight.

The following day was the most interesting of our trip. First, we visited St Krikor church in Kayseri which was built in 1191. The church is preserved in perfect condition with frescoes and other ornaments inside.

The church was once renovated in 1996 and then also in 2008. It was one of the most beautiful Armenian churches I've ever visited. When the church was built almost 1,000 years ago, there were about 20,000 Armenians living in Kayseri. Today, there are only five Armenians in the city, and they don't speak Armenian. A husband and wife plus their daughter are the guardians of the church.

The church is enclosed and surrounded by high walls. Many Armenian churches have been converted into mosques, but fortunately not this one.

After that visit we crossed Cappadocia, the land of rock formations in different shapes of cuneiforms. The sight was beyond my imagination.



The Boys' School in Erzurum

That day, we finished our tour at an old town called Göreme. Through narrow, uphill and winding streets we walked to an outside bazaar which was at the foot of a hill, inside which people had excavated and sculpted homes in old times.

At that open space, vendors had created an open-air bazaar. It was lot of fun to be there and enjoy the quaint surroundings and the cornucopia of colorful merchandise offered. The people could also enjoy camel rides. It was a unique experience combined with a Middle Eastern flavor.

That night we stayed in a town called Nevşehir. The following day, we visited the open-air museum where we explored the caves that early Christians had dug homes and sanctuaries, to find refuge from Romans.

We were not allowed to take photos of the inside walls of the small churches which were covered by paintings. It was a rare opportunity to visit that historical sight.

After that wonderful excursion, we drove south to the Mediterranean Sea. That evening we arrived at our destination town called Korykos, at around 5:30 p.m. and stayed at Barbarossa resort, for five nights by the beach.

Right by our resort there were two fortresses. One, on a small island about few hundred meters away from the coast, and the other one was right by the shore.

To reach the fortress on the island, we took a boat ride. The name of that fortress is Kiz-kalesi or the Girl's Fortress. History often partners with legends. Here's the legend of Kiz-kalesi.



St Krikor church, The Armenian Church in Kayseri (outside)

A fortune teller tells the king that his daughter will be killed by a venomous snake at her 16th birthday. He adds that even the king is unable to change her fate. Shocked by the fortune teller's words, the king tries to thwart the prophecy by building a castle on an island where no snake could reach.

He sends his daughter to live in the castle. But on her birthday a snake hides in a grape basket that was sent from the mainland and poisons the princess.

The historical records indicate that the castle was built by a Byzantine Emperor during the crusades. It was extensively rebuilt in the 13th century by Levon I, the Armenian king. The castle stayed under Armenian rulers for about a century.

On one of the inside walls of the fortress, there's an inscription in Armenian that mentions the name of an Armenian prince Oshin Hetumian [Օշին Հետումեան].

The Castle served as a rest area for wealthy merchants who traveled there. The remains of mosaic floors indicate that there were baths, with private stalls available for visitors. Also, there was a chapel.

After we returned to the shore, we visited the other fortress. Not much information is available for that one. It is assumed that both were built during the same period. The castle at the shore looked much larger; however it was totally in ruins.



St Krikor [Սուրբ Գրիգոր Լուսավորիչ] church,

The Armenian Church in Kayseri [Կեսարիա] (inside)

We saw the remains of a church with very tall walls. We also saw an Armenian cross-stone among the crumbled walls. The ruins captured my imagination. It provoked thoughts about our kings. I saw grandeur behind the decayed stone walls.

I could have spent a whole day exploring the ruins of that fortress, but it was getting dark and it was time to return to the resort.

On the following three days, the excursions were optional. I only took the first day which went to Adana [Աδανά] and continued to three more fortresses. The other two days, I stayed at the resort enjoying the Mediterranean Sea.

The name of Adana gives me chills, because it reminds me of the Armenian massacre that happened in April of 1909, when 30,000 Armenians, who were among the richest and most prosperous segment of Adana's population, were killed.

That day we didn't visit the old Armenian neighborhood of Adana, because our guide said we had to beat the traffic to get there and because the quarters stood in total ruins. However, we visited an Armenian girls' school, but only from outside. It had been turned into a cultural center. As with the Sanasarian boys' school, it stood like a jewel.

To reach the school, we walked over a very old bridge built by Romans around the 2nd century. It's called the Justinian Bridge or Stone Bridge and the Seyhan River [Seyhan Nehri] flows underneath. The bridge, in ancient times, linked the trade routes from the Mediterranean Sea to Anatolia and Persia.

It might be the largest bridge ever built in the ancient times. Some historians attribute the bridge to Emperor Justinian. It is simply a spectacular sight. The Seyhan River is the longest and maybe the widest river in Turkey.

From the bridge, we saw an astounding mosque. Our guide said it was called the Sabancı Central Mosque, which has a capacity to offer service to 28,500 people, and it is famous for being one of the largest mosques in the Middle East. It is located on the banks of Seyhan River, in close proximity to the Justinian bridge.

If I put aside my biased view, I should admit that the sight of the mosque with its six minarets, was opulent and majestic. I'm biased because this particular mosque was literally built on Armenian suffering. The mosque, which went into service in 1998, was constructed on a confiscated Armenian cemetery—a fact that is widely known.

The name of Sabancı comes from the family who funded the mosque. The family is one of the wealthiest families of Turkey. Our guide said that in a Turkish newspaper, he had read that the head of the Sabancı family had amassed its wealth by stripping Armenians of their money...

Eastern Turkey, or our Armenian ancestral lands, stands at the crossroad of the ancient world. There are so many historical artifacts sprinkled all over the region.

That day from Adana we continued our excursion to the north-east to reach the old city of Sis [Սիս] (now called Kozan), the capital of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia—40 miles north of Adana.

There we visited Kozan-Kalesi or the fortress of Kozan, built on a long, rocky ridge next to the modern city of Kozan. There's not an exact record about the time when the fortress was built, but it may go back to 2,000 years ago. The castle is thought to have been built by the Assyrians.

Kozan Castle has been home to several civilizations including the Assyrians, Hittites, Romans, Byzantines, Seljuks, Abbasids, Armenians and the Ottomans and has gone from hand to hand throughout its long history.

History tells us that in 1, 113 the fortress was captured by Toros I, the prince ruler of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Between 1180 to 1190 the capital of Armenian Kingdom was transferred from Anazarva [Աναζαբός / Անարκարա], to Kozan.

After Kozan we visited Anazarva the city and the fortress under the same name. It is said that this city was also founded by Assyrians about 2000 years ago. In 12th century the city was captured by Armenian kings, and that period lasted approximately two centuries.

Same as Kozan fortress, the city of Anazarva has gone through many layers of history. The architecture is astounding. Our guide said that horses were not allowed in the city, because the walkways were made of white marble.

On that day, our last stop was at the castle, or the fortress attributed to the Armenian King Leon I, in the province of Adana. During his reign, King Leon established Cilicia as a powerful and a unified Christian state.

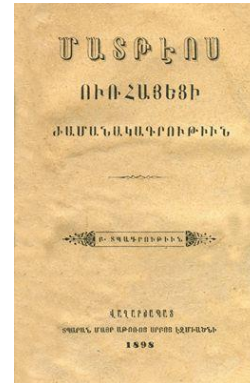
Visiting those fortresses and hearing the history behind the Armenian kings who ruled the area, called Cilicia, gave me a great joy. I understood how Cilicia became a prosperous territory under the Armenian kings.

It helped me to decipher and comprehend, the events that happened around 11th through 13th century in Cilicia, (Armenian: Կիլիկիա) the territory which covers the south coastal region of Asia Minor to the north-east of the rugged Taurus Mountains on the central part of Anatolia.

During the next two days I didn't join the excursions, because first I wanted to dedicate time to write and also I wanted to enjoy the calm, clean and lukewarm waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

On August 30, we left our resort to return to Yerevan. We stayed overnight in the city of Mush, which is an ancient Armenian settlement.

Before reaching Mush we stopped in Urfa, also known as Edessa, which is one of the ancient cities of the world. The Armenian historian Matthew of Edessa [Եղիսա - Ուրֆա] (known in Armenian as Մատթեոս Ուռհայեցի: recorded that prior to the Siege of Edessa in 1144 the city was home to 45,000 Armenians.



During the Siege the Turkish Atabeg of Aleppo ordered the massacre of the Armenians who had attempted to flee with the Crusaders and forced those who remained into slavery—there is so much history that we're not aware of.

During the Genocide the Armenians of Urfa tried to resist the Turkish assaults. They had a favorable situation, because the Armenian quarters were built on a hillside. The Armenians were able to resist for almost a month until October 23, 1915 when the Turkish heavy artillery destroyed the Armenian positions. Most Armenians were outright massacred.

Today Urfa is a town of 530,000 solely Muslim inhabitants. In 2007 the Turkish *Aksiyon* (Action) magazine estimated that the number of Islamized Armenians in Urfa stands at 17,500 people.

We arrived in Mush at around 8 p.m. We had our last dinner at the restaurant Park Lokantası, whose owner is Armenian. Today, only a handful of Armenians live in Mush and most of them do not speak Armenian. But there is a movement among the children of Islamized Armenians, who had accepted Islam to avoid persecution, to return to their origin and discover their heritage.

There are recorded evidences that before 1915, there were about 300 Armenian churches in the region of Mush [Մուշ]. The most well-known and the most magnificent of all those churches was Surp or Saint Marineh [Սուրբ Մարինէ].

The morning of our stay in Mush, we headed to the Armenian quarters which were in total ruins. From the church of Sourp Marineh, which was known as “Gatoghigue” [Կաթողիկէ] meaning Cathedral, only four bare walls were left standing and no roof.

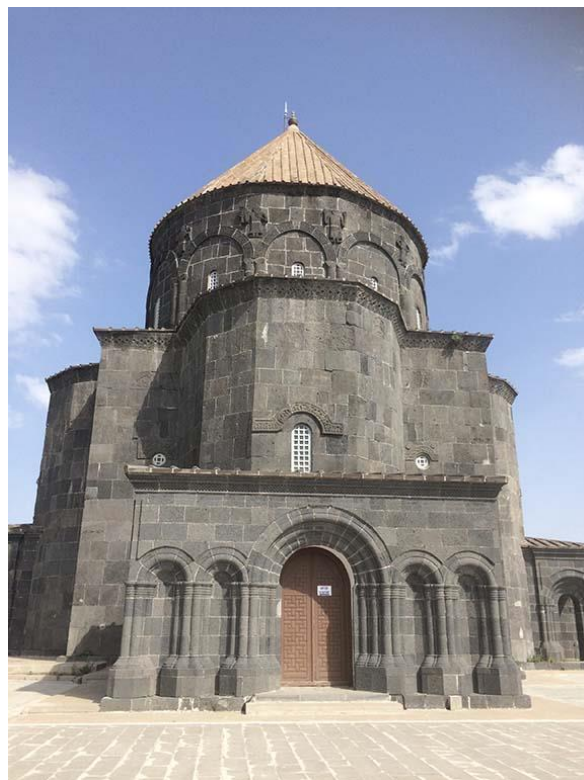
With a heavy heart at seeing the dilapidated church of Marineh, and the sad sight of the Armenian quarters, we boarded our minibus to our next destination, city of Kars [Կարս].

On our way to Kars we crossed a village, called Vardo [Վարդո]. Our tour guide told us a story about that village. During the genocide, the Armenians of that village had fled to the nearby mountain and had stayed there for a year. He added that the parents of Hrant Dink's (A prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist who was assassinated in 2007) wife lived in that city.

Our visit to Kars was brief. We first visited the house of our poet Charents [Չարենց], which was in ruins. Then we visited the Armenian Cathedral which was turned into a mosque.



There is not an exact date of when the church was built, but through different documents it's estimated to be built in the 10th century (928-953.) It broke my heart to see the church was turned into a mosque, but at least it was preserved. Kars was our last stop. After Kars we headed back home to Yerevan.



The Armenian cathedral in Kars converted into a mosque

It won't be an exaggeration if I tell you that this was my best trip ever. It was truly a well-organized expedition—a unique opportunity to see our lost homeland and the cities that

are considered holy for us Armenians. Our tour guide, a 27-year-old young man was so knowledgeable of Turkish-Armenian history. He patiently answered all our questions, and we learned a lot about our own history. The long stretches of the road were made it easy by singing the popular Armenian songs as a group. It was truly a memorable trip.